



## Notes

# Attraction of Seekers

*by James N. Birkitt, Jr., UFMCC Director of Communications*

## **Definition of Attraction:**

The strategies and methods which connect the benefits and services of your ministry with the needs and interests of those outside the church.

## **Introduction:**

How does church connect its ministries and services with persons who are not familiar with your congregation? What steps can your church take to attract increasing numbers of persons to visit your services and become part of your church?

One segment of behavioral science research known as “diffusion of innovations” studies the ways new ideas, causes and trends spread from person to person in a given cultural setting. This science confirms that humans follow predictable patterns which contribute to “attraction,” and that these patterns are part of a measurable process. Everett M. Rogers, a researcher in this field, has identified six stages people experience in embracing a new possibility or belief:

1. Awareness
2. Relevance
3. Interest
4. Trial
5. Adoption
6. Reinforcement

In church growth parlance, the first four stages comprise the process of “attraction,” the fifth relates to “assimilation” and the last correlates to “actualization.”

## **Foundational Principles:**

1. Attraction strategies and methods should be implemented after assimilation and actualization strategies are in place.
2. Attraction is a process not an event. Because it is a process, consistency of implementation directly correlates with levels of success in attracting new worshipers.
3. The process of attraction can be quantifiably and qualitatively measured through four distinct steps: (a) community image, (b) specific outreach or marketing strategies, (c) initial impressions and (d) visitor follow-up.
4. The terms “outreach,” “evangelism,” and “marketing” are used herein as interchangeable terms.

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## COMMUNITY IMAGE

### 1. Give Attention To Barriers

The development of effective attraction strategies begins with an assessment of your church's community image, and includes analysis of the barriers that keep people from entering your congregation.. This is an especially challenging task, since we tend to filter and analyze through our internal perceptions. The task here is to ascertain perceptions held by those outside the church. Just as we remove structural barriers to make our worship facilities physically accessible, this analysis deals with perception barriers, which likewise reduce accessibility to your church. Such analysis should give particular attention to the barriers which keep people away. Such barriers may include:

|                  |                            |
|------------------|----------------------------|
| Image Barrier A: | Christianity is false      |
| Image Barrier B: | Christianity is irrelevant |
| Image Barrier C: | Christianity is boring     |

|                     |                                                     |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural Barrier A: | Communications and format are culturally alienating |
| Cultural Barrier B: | Congregational patterns of dysfunction              |
| Cultural Barrier C: | Culturally inappropriate styles of worship          |

|                      |                                 |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Spiritual Barrier A: | Hostility to organized religion |
| Spiritual Barrier B: | Theological stumbling blocks    |
| Spiritual Barrier C: | Expectation of total commitment |

Questions: What unidentified barriers make it difficult for the unchurched to find and embrace your church? How can these barriers effectively be addressed in your ministry setting? In what ways you can anticipate and address these barriers early in the attraction process?

### 2. Demonstrate Community Involvement 'Outside The Four Walls Of The Church'

People are attracted to churches that care about more than their own existence. The Rev. Michael Piazza, senior pastor of the Cathedral of Hope MCC, calls this "outward orientation" and suggests that "all programming, counseling, benevolence, social activities, etc. are done with community service and outreach in mind."

Questions: How can your church demonstrate an "outward orientation?" Does your church participate in local Pride organizations? Volunteer at the local children's hospital or food bank? Do you offer specific ministries which improve the lives of people in your community? Do you promote these ministries to your community. Does your pastor represent your MCC congregation at the local ministerial association?

### 3. Be Intentional At Every Level About Meeting Needs

Schuller describes one of the keys to attracting new worshipers this way: "Find a need and meet it! Find a problem and solve it!"

Analyze every ministry, program, service and sermon through these two filters:

Does it address one or more of the basic human needs? (i.e., need for hope, acceptance, love, faith, freedom from guilt, friendship, community, self-esteem)

Does it address one or more needs specific to my location or my community? (i.e., needs related to parenting issues, alcohol abuse, relationship issues, loneliness, work-related issues, employment skills, etc.)

**4. Handle Conflict Creatively, Positively and Effectively**

Few things can do more to harm your church's image – or inhibit your church's ability to attract new worshipers – than on-going, unresolved internal church conflict. Conflict resolution is a learned skill and becomes part of a local church's culture only when it is modeled by the Pastor and church leadership.

Questions: Are we effectively dealing with internal conflict? Are conflicts processed in healthy ways? What perceptions about conflict exist in the general community? Is my congregation perceived as "healthy?"

**5. Positive Spirituality Attracts Positive People!**

There is something magnetic about a church that promotes positive spirituality. Good news also travels fast! Positive spirituality is reflected by members who say, "I feel better at the end of a service than when I arrived!"

Positive spirituality:

- A. Offers hope.
- B. Lifts the human spirit.
- C. Has practical application to everyday life.

Questions: In what ways do we promote positive spirituality? Do visitors and members sense a positive spirit in our services and meetings? Are services and sermons designed to specifically communicate hope, affirmation and practical application?

## **OUTREACH, EVANGELISM OR MARKETING STRATEGIES**

**1. Reach Prospects When They Are Most Reachable**

No person is equally ready at all times to be open to your message. Church Growth research reveals that people are especially open to the Church's message at three broad junctures:

- A. Dissatisfaction with life, i.e., mid-life crisis, personal awakening, relationship problems, at divorce or end of a relationship.



- B. Cultural change, i.e., when significant cultural changes or shifts take place, including but not limited to political, social or economic change or threat, changes in societal family values, during war or civil unrest, during rapid urbanization.
- C. Individual stress, i.e., marriage, loss of a job, sickness, mid-life crisis, job transfer, housing move, birth of a child, etc.

People exhibit a special openness to the church's message during these "pivotal points."

Questions: Does your ministry strategy include guiding people going through "pivotal transitions" into finding ongoing help and support in your community of faith? Do your "outward orientation" strategies take these special periods of openness into consideration?

## 2. **Step 'Outside Yourself' And Begin Where The Prospects Are**

One of the dangers of professional ministry is that we tend to view things through our beliefs, experiences and culture. That's dangerous to do with unchurched persons -- they may not share our beliefs, experiences or culture. Effective marketing begins by understanding the other person. What are their needs? Their expectations? Their background?

Questions: Is your prospect from an unchurched or non-Christian background? How does your church relate to such persons? Is your prospect from a conservative Christian background? How does your church build bridges of understanding with people from this background? Is your prospect out or closeted? How does this affect the message you share?

## 3. **Provide Positive Ministry to the Resistant**

Many people are naturally resistant to the church's message. Is there a way to reach the resistant? George Hunter (The Contagious Congregation, Abingdon) suggests ministry and outreach to the resistant involves "presence, service and seed sowing." Ministry in these areas can attract the resistant when implemented consistently over time.

Question: When targeting our church's message, do we include those who are especially resistant or hostile to the Gospel? Are they part of our strategy of sharing the Good News?

## 4. **Communicate More Than Fact... Communicate Benefits!**

Use your church communication vehicles (worship folder, newsletter, direct mail, news releases, public service announcements, bulletin boards, posters) to communicate *benefits*, not simply *facts*.

EXAMPLE: Which of the following announcements is more motivational?

(1) "Join us for Bible Study each Thursday at 7:30 PM."

(2) “You can discover the keys to spiritual and emotional health as we study what the Bible really says! Join us each Thursday at 7:30 PM for a fast-paced, one hour Bible study – and meet new friends, too!”

Questions: List your church’s programs and ministries. What benefits can you identify with each? How can you promote these benefits to your target audiences?

#### **4. Establish and Work a Mailing List**

What do corporations, businesses, political organizations and civic groups know that most churches undervalue? They know the power of establishing and working a mailing list. Direct mail is one of the most powerful, effective ways to convey your church’s vision and ministries to prospects. Studies consistently show that well-executed direct mail programs more than pay for themselves through increased attendance and increased membership.

Direct mail has incredible power because:

- A. Most people look forward to receiving mail.
- B. It provides personal, one-on-one communication.
- C. You control the tone and message.
- D. It can be read and re-read.
- E. It can convey emotion... vision... inspiration.

Build you mailing list creatively. Of course, you’ll include every visitor. Why not offer a free brochure on the Bible and homosexuality to everyone who calls – and add those names to your mailing list? Have sign-up sheets for your mailing list at Pride Weekend events and all community events.

NOTE: We anticipate that all of the benefits of direct mail will accrue to churches that establish “e-mail mailing lists” and work the same strategies.

Questions: Are we maintaining an adequate mailing list? Are we aggressively building this list through community promotions? What is our church’s policy for removing names from our list? In what ways can we more effectively use our mailing list to reach people? Have you considered using e-mail as a variant of a direct mail ministry?

#### **5. Use Marketing Tools To Anticipate And Answer Objections And Anxieties**

Your communications vehicles have incredible power to overcome objections and anxieties by persons not familiar with your church. Remember that by anticipating and answering objections and anxieties, you make it easier for people to embrace your ministry.

#### **6. Use Free Media To Share Your Church’s Story and Events**

Churches that reach large numbers of first time visitors make frequent and effective use of free media, including press releases (to print and broadcast news media) and public service announcements (to radio and television stations).



Questions: Do we send news releases and PSA's to announce events and activities within our church? Do we maintain a contact list of the local mainline press, gay press, and religion editors? Do we follow professional standards for writing news releases? Do we allow proper lead time between mailing dates and publication dates?

## **INITIAL IMPRESSIONS**

What impression does your worship facility – and worship service – make on people who have responded to your marketing efforts and have arrived for their first MCC service? Let's face it: It's human nature that we get comfortable in our surroundings – and often forget what impression we make on first-time visitors. Remember the old saying: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Here's a partial checklist to help you think from a visitor's perspective:

**Parking:** Is there adequate parking? Is parking easy to find? Is it close to your worship facility? Do you have parking spaces reserved and identified for visitors?

**Entrance:** Is the entrance to your church easy to find? Do signs guide first-time visitors to your entrance? Are signs visible? Legible? In good repair? Do signs convey clear message? [Andrew Weeks of The Alban Institute notes that lots of signs conveys a secondary, subliminal message to visitors: "Simply by reading the signs, visitors have an opportunity to see what an array of diverse activities the church offers. Also, by showing newcomers where things happen, it demonstrates a conscious desire to include newcomers in the activities."

**Bulletin Boards:** Are bulletin boards utilized to include church and community information? Do bulletin boards contain maps of your facilities, pointing the way to the sanctuary, church offices, children's ministry, meeting rooms, rest rooms, etc?

**Church Grounds:** Do our church grounds demonstrate pride and care? Is the grass mowed? Are hedges trimmed? Are flower beds free of weeds? Are sidewalks swept and in good repair? Are handicapped entrances clearly marked?

**Buildings:** Inspect all painted surfaces, including walls, doors, windows? Is paint peeling? Are wall colors warm and inviting? Or dull and faded? Are hallways and open spaces free of debris and clutter?

**Lighting:** Is interior lighting bright and cheerful? Check outdoor lighting at night. Are sign visible? Does outdoor lighting allow visitors to approach the building safely?

**Worship Services:** Do your worship materials anticipate and answer the questions of first-time visitors? Is the procedure for taking Holy Communion adequately explained? Do your worship materials reflect your church's mission statement? Statement of faith? Analyze the materials used in your worship service. Would a visitor be able to easily understand who and how to contact with follow-up questions?

## **VISITOR FOLLOW-UP STRATEGIES**

A well-designed system for following first-time visitors can significantly impact your church's ability to transition prospects from visitors to members.

The follow-up system might include one or more of the following:

1. A personal letter from the pastor within 48 hours. The letter should be positive, affirming, and "customer service" oriented. Thank the visitor for attending your services. Invite them to return. Ask if they need additional information. Explain their options to obtain more information (church office hours, how to reach your church's website, your church's phone number and e-mail address).
2. If culturally appropriate, a brief follow-up phone call from the pastor or deacon immediately following the first visit can positively reinforce the visit, answer questions or concerns, express goodwill and reinforce the church care and concern. Such calls are often most effective when kept positive, upbeat and brief – no more than two minutes.
3. A second follow-up letter from an associate pastor or deacon, mailed by Thursday (to arrive by Saturday). Again be bright, brief, positive, helpful. Consider enclosing a brief survey and invite their help and feedback. Invite them to attend a four-week orientation class to learn more about your church, its beliefs and ministries, etc.
4. A third letter might include an invitation to visit a small-group Bible study of special interest group.

NOTE: Some churches feel "people will be turned off by this much follow-up." Research does not bear this out. Hunter cites a classic study in which 90% of the prospects who received three contacts within one week of their visit joined a four-session orientation class. When the contacts are delayed more than a week, positive response drops to 50%. And when the three contacts are spread over a one-month period, the response rate drops to 10%. The keys to the successful use of this type of follow-up include four elements: the follow-up occurs quickly after the first visit, they are kept brief, they are consistently positive and offer to be of help, and they come from different sources in the church (pastor, deacon, small group leader, etc.).



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## G/L/B/T SPIRITUALITY SURVEY

The DataLounge website has conducted a survey of gay spirituality via the Internet. While this is not a strictly scientific survey, it provides some interesting glimpses into our communities -- and vividly demonstrates the opportunities before UFMCC. Pastors, worship leaders and outreach committees who seek to reach unchurched persons may benefit from this information. Here are some of the results:

A. Do you consider yourself a religious or spiritual person?

40.31% No      59.69% Yes

B. When was last time you attended a religious service (other than wedding/funeral)?

Less than a week ago      24.39%

Less than a month ago      4.88%

Less than six months ago      10.57%

More than six months ago      6.50%

More than a year ago      53.66%

C. Have you ever attended the services of the Metropolitan Community Church or another largely gay and lesbian religious group?

32.81% Yes      67.19% No

D. If you have never attended MCC, are you curious (even the least bit)?

46.59% Yes      53.41% No

E. Which best describes your current faith:

18.60% Atheist

34.11% Agnostic

35.66% Faithful

11.63% Deeply Faithful

### SUMMARY NOTES:

Almost one-half of the g/l/b/t respondents who have never attended an MCC expressed some interest in our churches.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents consider themselves "religious" or "spiritual."

Almost one-third of the respondents have attended some type of religious service within the past month.

Over one-half of the respondents have attended no religious services for more than one year.

47% of respondents describe themselves as faithful or very faithful.

Almost one-third of the respondents describe themselves as agnostics. [NOTE: These are people who may be reached through "seeker" services.]

44% say their past religious experience made it more difficult to accept their sexuality.





# Resources for the Attraction of Seekers

compiled by James N. Birkitt, Jr.: October 15, 1997

## Highly recommended books

Barna, George. *User Friendly Churches*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991). Excellent material distilled from churches which are effectively attracting seekers. Helpful information on what does and does not work. Good sections on creating positive attitudes, marketing, understanding the unchurched, and making churches accessible.

Hunter III, George G. *How To Reach Secular People*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). Helpful guide for moving from an "inward focus" to an "outward orientation." Pay special attention to the sections which profile secular populations, and strategies for communicating with the unchurched.

Miller, Herb. *Fishing On The Asphalt: Effective Evangelism In Mainline Denominations*. (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1983). A wealth of ideas and strategies for effective evangelism. Written from a mainline denominational perspective, many ideas will need to be adapted to UFMCC ministry. Excellent ideas for building positive self-identity, hope and joy into your congregation. Added benefit: great sermon illustrations!

Mueller, Walter. *Direct Mail Ministry: Evangelism, Stewardship, Caregiving*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). Introductory primer on the basics of direct mail adapted for local congregations. Strong section in writing direct mail copy, and strategies for using direct mail for general communication, evangelism, pastoral care and stewardship.

Piazza, Michael S. *Growth or Death*. (Dallas: Sources of Hope Publishing, 1994). Good resource from someone who has tested and proven this book's strategies in the local MCC context. Helpful, practical information on developing an outward orientation, casting vision, making your church visitor friendly and strategies for incorporating visitors into the life of your congregation.

Shawchuck, Norman, et al. *Marketing for Congregations*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). Excellent material to help you ascertain community needs, develop programs that address those needs, communicate your church's benefits and services. Worth the price of the book for the chapter, "Approaching People In the Right Spirit."

Trout, Jack. *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing: Violate Them At Your Own Risk!* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993). The creative leader can adapt these 22 laws of marketing to clarify your church's message – and make your message heard.

Weeden, Larry K., ed. *The Magnetic Fellowship: Reaching and Keeping People*. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988). This is the premier text on establishing a positive atmosphere and creating a church which is attractive to the unchurched. Includes

additional materials on outreach methods, creative ideas for evangelism and meeting needs of newcomers.

Weeks, Andrew D. *Welcome! Tools and Techniques for New Member Ministry*. (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1992). A wealth of helpful, practical material, from imaginative marketing ideas to ways to greet newcomers, and production of welcoming materials to visitor tracking strategies. Filled with sample materials. An alternative computer disk with pre-designed samples of all materials is also available.

### **Other resources**

Barna, George Barna. *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing: Breaking Ground for the Harvest*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992).

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